

Seen from space, satellite images of the U.S. drought display a huge swath of brown across the heartland of our nation. Missouri is right in the center of the disaster, dusty and brown where you would ordinarily see the deep green of healthy agriculture.

Seen from up close, in my many conversations with farmers, ranchers and dairy operators on their land in our congressional district, the drought is much more personal. Some farmers are faced with the first total losses in their lives. Some ranchers are being forced to thin their herds at the expense of their long-term livelihoods. Some dairies are contemplating selling cows rather than suffer from the spread between their cost of feed and the price of milk. It is bad, and it's going to get worse.

The high costs faced by farmers and ranchers today, their losses and their poor yields are about to set off a domino effect throughout the American food chain. Higher prices for milk, bread, meat and produce will eventually reach store shelves at the worst possible time for our rural families.

There is no question that this is a disaster in every way, shape and form – with wide-ranging effects.

I've pressed for congressional action on an agricultural emergency bill, and I've written and introduced legislation to authorize three key livestock disaster programs to meet the needs of producers in Southern Missouri. But unless we act soon, there will be too little help, too late for many family farms, ranches and dairies which are simply unable to deal with losses on this scale.

When our family agricultural operations disappear, the entire local economy is set to suffer. Gone are the farmers and ranchers who buy equipment, seed and feed from the local dealer, who bank in the community, who share equipment or labor with their neighbor, who use the goods and services in town. They are replaced with corporate concerns who deal with all of these business needs from a central location in an office building somewhere far away. The money going through our local economy is literally put on a bypass around our communities and going directly from one corporation to another.

When we talk about the importance of saving family producers of agriculture, it is times like these that will test our resolve.

Our producers are always prepared to take on risk and uncertainty. We never know how good a year it will be for crops or livestock -- but we never expect that things might get this bad.

Now is the time to express basic support for our ranchers, our farmers and our rural communities. On issues from water infrastructure to disaster payments to emergency forage for livestock, we can present a united, bipartisan front. When we protect our safe, affordable food supply in America, we are also protecting our health, our educational system, our national defense and our economy. A strong statement on policy in each of these areas is required to show comprehensive support for the producers who are enduring the worst drought they have ever known.

Viewed from far away or up close, the situation is severe, and we must address it now.